



Preparing to work with fathers: setting the stage for father-friendly programming



Minn. Fathers & Families Network
161 Saint Anthony Ave. Suite 845
Saint Paul, MN 55103
info@mnfathers.org

Visit us online at:
www.mnfathers.org

InfoSheet 8: Preparing for Father Work

This InfoSheet seeks to aid organizations and agencies that want to add a father-specific program or a father-recruitment goal to their existing social service programming or educational calendar.

Goals: Why are you targeting fathers?

For many professionals, the value of working with fathers is clear. Research increasingly points to the strong protective factors that father-presence creates; children with involved fathers tend to exhibit increased academic performance, stronger interpersonal skills, and higher confidence (See MFFN's InfoSheet #3 for more information about "Positive Father Involvement" online at www.mnfathers.org/resources.html).

However, for professionals working in multi-faceted institutions, it is important to take time to examine the institutional commitment and rationale for working with fathers. It is easy to rush to develop a program and to start recruitment of men from the community; but lack of proper preparation may lead to resentment or misunderstanding from colleagues and co-workers within the larger organization.

In organizations that have traditionally targeted women and children, the addition of a father-outreach effort may require subtle changes in procedures in order to alleviate fears that father-programming will take resources away from mothers—it shouldn't. Take time to challenge the notion that fathers receive enough support—generally, they don't. Take time to explain how programming for fathers supports both mothers and children—it can; and it should.

According to the publication *Working with Fathers*, from the London-based organization Fathers Direct¹, there are three key questions to ask before you begin to design your father-specific programming:

- How important are children's relationships with their fathers in the families and communities we are working with? How do those relationships influence children's wellbeing – both positively and negatively?
- How can supporting father-child relationships help our agency and colleagues meet our existing goals?
- What specific, workable objectives can we adopt to achieve this?

Father-friendliness brings together two powerful but simple ideas: placing the welfare of children at the center, and recognizing the important influence men have, or can have, in children's lives.¹

Another consideration, before starting your work with fathers, is longer-term organizational commitment. As stated by Lowell Johnson and Glen Palm², "As programs strive to provide parent education / support services to fathers, issues about commitment surface. The primary commitment necessary for successful fathers' groups probably lies at the program leadership level. Given that it often takes three to five years of outreach work to see results in any new program, it must be asked whether program leaders are truly committed to such a long-term effort."

Barriers: Why have fathers not participated in the past?

For agencies and institutions that haven't had a strong father-presence in the past, it may prove valuable to consider your organizational history. What barriers may continue to exist that will make it difficult for you to develop a father-friendly niche?

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What perceptions in the community may limit men from feeling welcomed within the walls of your organization?

The booklet, *Expanding the Goals of 'Responsible Fatherhood' Policy*³, explains internal and external challenges for bringing men into social services programs. This study found that more than three-quarters of all caseworkers were women. In many interviews, the female caseworkers suggested, "they might identify with female clients."

Furthermore, "according to fathers and practitioners, caseworkers' negative attitudes towards fathers further discourage fathers from asking for services. Caseworkers made similar observations about their colleagues, but not themselves. When asked to identify the most significant barrier to improving services for noncustodial fathers, caseworkers most frequently mentioned the existence of negative attitudes and stereotypes held by the general public and social services staff about noncustodial fathers."

Externally, the booklet cites fathers' lack of trust of "the system". "Fathers don't trust service providers and fear negative consequences of requesting services. ...Practitioners and fathers said overwhelmingly that the primary reason fathers don't use services is that they are uncomfortable – even fearful of – the system." In other situations, men may perceive a cultural stereotype that "parenting programs" are really "mothering programs". Without an explicit invitation and an obvious male-oriented element, some fathers feel marginalized or extraneous.

According to Johnson and Palm², fathers cite six categories of barriers to participation in family education programs. These barriers include:

- Attitudes towards parent education (i.e., "parenting comes naturally");
- Time constraints;
- Format of the program (i.e., commitment is too long; men stand out because mostly women would be there);
- Sex-role definitions in the family (i.e., "my wife can tell me");
- No need for support; and
- Unaware of program.

Programs may want to start out with special events, drop-in groups, or short three- or four-time sessions to help introduce the program to a broad range of fathers.²

Program Design: Who are the fathers?

Now that you've examined your goals, any internal barriers, and external barriers, you may be ready to begin designing a program for fathers. At this point, you are ready to learn about the fathers in your community. Fathers Direct¹ states, "Even if you are a father yourself, you may not know much about other fathers. Most operate behind closed doors and, unlike mothers, don't parent publicly, in packs. Little research on fathers is widely publicized. And in family services, male staff and volunteers are rare and few workers have met many fathers, or talked seriously with them." *Working with Fathers*¹ suggests a number of questions to ask, in order to develop a profile of local fathers and the services that they want:

- What kinds of fathers live in this area, or have children living in the area?
- What are their ages, ethnicity, education, working and leisure patterns, values, beliefs, interests, priorities, hopes, fears?
- What roles do they already play in their children's lives?
- What roles do they want to play?
- What roles do other family members (particularly their children) want them to play?
- What gets in the way of them achieving those aspirations?
- What has been their experience of family services to date?
- With what other agencies are they in touch?
- What services would they like (or need) to help them achieve such goals?
- What will encourage them to access those services? Where and when should they take place? What sorts of workers should run them?

Careful consideration of responses to these questions will guide the development of a successful father-involvement effort. But this is only the beginning...the next steps, recruiting and retaining fathers in your programs, will be equally important for the long-term positive effects that you will seek to bestow on fathers, children, families, and your community.

Sources:

¹ Adrienne Burgess and David Bartlett. *Working with Fathers: A Guide for Everyone Working with Families*. Fathers Direct: 2004.

² Lowell Johnson and Glen Palm. "Planning Programs: What Do Fathers Want?" *Working With Fathers: Methods and Perspectives*. The Minnesota Fathering Alliance: 1992.

³ Juliane Baron and Kathleen Sylvester. *Expanding the Goals of "Responsible Fatherhood" Policy*. Social Policy Action Network and National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families: 2002.

